Times Square
Max Neuhaus's Sound Work in New York City

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From now on, the editors of *Open* will (re) focus attention on an existing work of art in public space. Max Neuhaus's *Sound Work* was first installed on Times Square in 1977. It ceased to function in 1992. In 2002 the Dia Art Foundation restored this work of art and included it in their collection. Ulrich Loock analyses the work and describes how Neuman separates sound from the dimension of time. Without being visually or materially present, Neuhaus creates what he calls an individual and authentic experience of place.



Installation of the Sound Work by Max Neuhaus on Times Square in New York. – © Max Neuhaus

The scandal that culminated in the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from the Federal Plaza in New York differs from a number of comparable incidents in two crucial respects. Rarely have apparently democratic means been applied so sweepingly for an act of what Benjamin Buchloh described as 'vandalism from above',[1] in order to ensure the destruction of a public work of art. And this act of vandalism was directed against a sculpture that embodies, like few others, the contradiction between the claim to autonomy in modernist art and the integration of a work of such art in a public space. Serra's sculpture is a work of abstract art whose form and siting respond to the spatial and architectonic givens of the Federal Plaza and create particular conditions for its perception. In intransigent opposition

to the domination of the public space by the spectacle of architecture and media, Serra reclaims with his work the possibility of a direct aesthetic experience of space, which he regards as the prerogative of an art that calls upon no other justification beyond itself.

As Serra unequivocally states: 'After the piece is created, the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture.' [2] He expresses something of the implacability and exclusivity of the aesthetic claim of his work when he says that, in creating *Tilted Arc,* 'I've found a way to dislocate or alter the decorative function of the plaza and actively bring people into the sculpture's context'. [3] The potential for experience harboured in this dislocation, this dislocation as a precondition of the possibility of unique spatial experience, conveyed by the presence of the steel sculpture cutting through the plaza, is something to which the users of the urban space are inexorably bound. For someone who is unwilling or unable to comply with the sculpture's demand, it becomes a monumental obstacle. Thus the claim to resistance against the public suppression of individual possibilities of experience is contradicted by the domination of the plaza by Richard Serra's individualistic aesthetic gesture. Overcoming this contradiction is not his concern.

Just as the contradictory claim to oppose the alienated experience of public space in the form of an unavoidable impediment can hardly be taken to justify the vandalization of Richard Serra's work, so too is it hardly a primary characteristic of Max Neuhaus's work to avoid the populistically charged aversion against art in public spaces. Yet Neuhaus's work can be considered as resolving some of the contradictions exemplified by a work like the *Tilted Arc.* As far as the complexity of possible perception, its digression from the totalized experience of the urban space, the sheer size of the work and the public significance of its site are concerned, Neuhaus's *Sound Work* on Times Square can hold its own with Serra's sculpture. Yet this is a work whose material is a sound. It is a work without a visible or tangible object. It is constructed in such a way that it is up to the individual passer-by to respond to it, or not. Those who choose not to are not disturbed by the work either.

Paradigma Shift

Max Neuhaus began his artistic career in the late 1950s as a musician, a percussionist, and soon went on to create his own works of music – in connection with contemporary practices aimed at dismantling the categorical separation of composer and performer. He looked to the most advanced concepts of the time, which extended and expanded the concept of music to include, by means of a kind of reversal, what had previously been excluded, in order to arrive at a broader definition of music: noise on the one hand – the Bruitism of the Italian Futurists springs to mind here – and silence on the other hand – as in, for example, John Cage's *4'33"*. So, if concepts of music were initially crucial for Max Neuhaus, such works as *Times Square* and other pieces he made before and after, owe much to a radical break with musical thinking. Neuhaus describes a change of paradigm in formulating a notion that is fundamental to his *Sound Works* – 'that of removing sound from time, and setting it, instead, in place'. [4] This change of paradigm makes it obvious to think of sculpture as the point of reference for his work, for sculpture is the medium of an artistic practice that creates the conditions for the specific perception of place. Admittedly, only the most advanced forms of late 1960s sculpture, as discussed by Rosalind Krauss in her essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', would be conceivable as a reference. [5]

Rosalind Krauss writes: 'For, within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium – sculpture – but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium – photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself – might be used. Thus the field provides both for an expanded but finite set of related positions for a given artist to occupy and explore, and for an organization of work that is not directed by the conditions of a particular medium.' [6] In connection with the work of Max Neuhaus, those positions are of interest in which the artistic operation is linked on the one hand with landscape and on the other hand with

architecture – both areas traditionally excluded from 'sculpture' in order to defend an unambiguous definition of that category. In the following, I shall trace the construction of a place in the *Sound Works* of Max Neuhaus. However, right from the start, I would like to keep an open mind as to the significance of the fact that he has used sound and no other material for the construction of a place. Is sound a further possible material for a sculptural or rather non-sculptural practice in the expanded field, or does it perhaps make a crucial difference to have to do with a work that is physical, sensually perceptible, without being an object? It is surely not pure coincidence that the various materials listed by Krauss are all materials of visual, tangible objects.

Traffic Island

The location of Max Neuhaus's work on Times Square is a seemingly unused and useless area between Broadway and 7th Avenue and 45th and 46th Street, a deserted traffic island on the northern edge of a square that is otherwise developed and exploited to the full. In 1977, when Neuhaus first installed the work, it was not commissioned. He had discovered this strange space and, recognizing its potential, had applied to the nyc Transit Authority for permission to use the subway ventilation vaults under the traffic island to install the necessary technical system. In order to finance the work, Neuhaus founded his own non-profit organization, hear*,* for which he was able to apply for funds from the *Rockefeller Foundation*, the *National Endowment for the Arts* and private donors. After its initial installation, the work functioned uninterrupted for fifteen years, until Max Neuhaus turned it off in 1992 to lend weight to his demand that a suitable institution should take responsibility for *Times Square*. Ten years after that, just such an institution was found: The Dia Art Foundation. The work was duly included in the Dia Collection and at the beginning of 2002, new state-of-the-art technology was installed to generate and transmit the sound. Most importantly, the original electronic generation of sound was converted to digital and documented accordingly. This means that the sound, though not indestructible, can be remade at any time. This puts an end to any fears about the durability of an electronic work of art. On 22 May 2002 *Times Square* was started up again and can now – at least as far as the technical prerequisites are concerned – run unchanged indefinitely.

Nowhere on Times Square there is a plaque or sign or any other indication of this work, its author and its sponsors. Anyone who actually notices the work either knows about it already or suddenly discovers the strange sound coming from beneath the grating. Max Neuhaus describes *Times Square* as follows: 'The work is an invisible, unmarked block of sound on the north end of the island. Its sonority, a rich harmonic sound texture resembling the after ring of large bells, is an impossibility within this context. Many who pass through it, however, can dismiss it as an unusual machinery sound from below the ground. For those who find it and accept the sound's impossibility, though, the island becomes a different place, separate, but including its surroundings. These people, having no way of knowing that it has been deliberately made, usually claim the work as a place of their own discovering.' [7] The sound has fairly clearly determined limits that correspond to the size of the grating. This explains the listener's unequivocal sense of transition from an area where the sound cannot be heard to an area where it can be heard, where one finds oneself in the area of the sound, being surrounded by and immersed in the sound. On the other hand, this means that it is impossible to perceive the sound 'from outside'. Even though it possesses the 'objectivity' of something situated outside an individual's consciousness, and, as such, is an object of sensual perception, it differs fundamentally from visible and tangible things that can be grasped from a distance as discrete objects.

Aural Perception

Visual perception seems to differ in the following way from aural perception: we speak of the 'sight' of a thing and accept that it can change even when the thing remains the same, as, for instance, under changing light conditions. But we are not willing to speak of a sight that is not a sight of something. Seeing seems to be referred to identifiable things and objects. The sight of things that the eye is not able to grasp, things that are beyond visual identification, requiring a concept for comprehension, might be regarded as a borderline case of visual experience. I am referring here to an experience of seeing that is reflected in theories of the sublime and echoed in, say, Abstract Expressionist painting, namely in the work of Barnett Newman. Even though, on the other hand, we are aware that there is a source for every sound, an object from which it comes and by which it is generated, such as a car, a violin, a loudspeaker, we seem to be perfectly willing to accept what we hear – sounds – independently of their sources. In visual perception it is not so easy to find something that corresponds to the statement 'I hear a rumbling', by which we mean: 'I hear a sound that could have a number of different sources. I am not speaking about the object that is generating this noise, but about a distinctive resonance that I can sense and want to draw to your attention.'

There would appear to be a difference of temporality between what can be seen and what can be heard. One of the essential qualities of sound seems to be its fading – a beginning and an end of its sounding which doesn't appear to be directly linked to the presence or absence of the source of the sound. There is an inner relationship between sound and the passing of time. The time of visibility, however, in most instances is equal to the span of time in which the visible thing is present, no matter how the visibility is modified by circumstances. One might be tempted to relate the discrepancy between the temporality of the visible and that of the audible to the fact that the person that is concerned with the visible has the option of closing his or her eyes or turning their gaze away, which is not an option available to the same extent for sounds.

The perception of a sound is comparable to the perception of a draught of air, or a sense of heat or cold – requiring direct physical contact. It may be that the corporeality of the sound, its concreteness, reduces the urgency of identifying the object of its source. It may also be that the privilege granted to the eye rather than the ear through the history and development of civilization has made it possible to abstract the sound from its source, since the acoustic identification of that source is no longer necessary to survival. As though to confirm this notion ***ex negativo***, Max Neuhaus himself refers to a specific example of the still vital necessity of identifying a sound with its source when he notes that accidents can happen when people in traffic can hear the siren of an emergency vehicle but are unable to locate it. In 1988-1989 he worked on a project for a siren whose sound is designed to allow a better assessment of the direction and distance of the moving car.

Place and Time

Where the sound can be heard in *Times Square*, there is the zone of the sound. Through the sound, this zone is excluded from the surroundings and given its own aurally perceptible quality. Neuhaus 'builds' a sound that is related to the sounds in the environment, that is taken from the site. In a way, it is misleading that he compares the sound in *Times Square* with the reverberation of huge bells. The sound of the work is close to the sounds of Times Square and differs at the same time from all the sounds that occur there, so that, though it is not unlikely in this place, it is nevertheless strange. It is always possible to distinguish between the sound of the work of Max Neuhaus and the mass of all the other sounds – and it appears as if all the other sounds merge into one single mass compared with the sound of the work – subtle as the contrast may be.

More precisely, the zone of sound is a block soaring from the depths, whose extent and shape can only be identified by walking around, determining as one moves through the space, if one is inside or outside the realm of the work. In the case of *Times Square* the sound itself is not uniform, but possesses different qualities at various parts of the zone of sound. These differences are due to particular frequency combinations, which might best be described as different sound colours. The inner modelling of the zone, its topography, can once again only be experienced by a listener in movement. The topography itself is static. It depends on the differentiation of a sound that does not undergo any development in time, nor performs any scansion, extension, abbreviation or acceleration of time, whether in the form of a sequence of different sounds or organized intervals of sound and non-sound. In contrast to all conventional experience of sounds, the sound as applied by Max Neuhaus is continuous and unchanged through time.

When Neuhaus stresses that his works are not music, and do not even belong within an expanded field of music, this is not so much the reflex of an innovative artist against his own beginnings, but mirrors his main aim of dissociating the sound from the dimension of time, which is of such fundamental significance to music. The supreme importance of time for music is particularly evident in a piece I already mentioned, a piece that expanded the field of music as few others have done, in that it is nothing but the performance of silence: John Cage's *4'33"*. Not only is the length of this piece precisely defined down to the last second, but also, the score indicates three movements, each of an exactly defined length. What is the reason for dissociating sound from the temporal organization that in art is assured by music? Time, in music, is a period determined by the composer and / or the performer, and is different from the time of the respective listener. By spatializing sound, Max Neuhaus gives the individual the possibility of perceiving sound in his or her own time. [8]

When there is no sequence for the sound, its spatial dimension comes to the fore – the dimension that describes its scope. Max Neuhaus constructs the sound in such a way that the question of 'when?' or 'how long?' is replaced by the question 'where?'. The 'where?' of the sound is its place. If we define space as the pure condition of the possibility to juxtapose the manifold, we define place as a spatial entity that emerges only with the real relationship of volumes to one another. Max Neuhaus perceives sounds as bodies in this sense, forming a place through their relation to one another. Where the sound can be heard, where its place is, is determined in contrast to where it is not to be heard. The work has a place insofar as it differs from another already existing place. This prompts Denys Zacharopoulos to write: 'The place we perceive in Neuhaus's work is nearly always a place within a place, another place that specific experience and active perception define as being there and nowhere else.' [9] Because the sound of the *Sound Work* is similar to the other noises in terms of volume and tonal colour, and is not directly distinguishable from the ambient noises, it requires particular attentiveness and an extraordinary activation of the sense of hearing in order to perceive it: there is a shift from primarily visual perception to aural perception – this is particularly notable in a place like Times Square, which on the other hand is more likely than many other places to comply with and confirm the supremacy of the visual.

The Sum of All Noises

If the *Sound Work* cannot be heard 'from outside', it is also true, conversely, that, together with the sound, and distinct from it, the sum of all the other noises of Times Square can be heard. The *Sound Work* and its environment relate to one another as foreground and background, yet when attention is focused on the work, the other noises of Times Square also move into the centre of perception along with it. A shift of attention, which may also depend on the changing volume of traffic noise, can result in an exchange of background and foreground: the ambient noises can emerge distinctly and can also fade further into

the background of the *Sound Work*. Ambient noises can be heard with the sound of Max Neuhaus's work in one's ear – not blended with it (a sum of sounds does not result), but coloured by the *Sound Work.* A fine example of the kind of colouring created by the *Sound Work* is the effect of stained glass windows in a medieval cathedral: everything in the church – people, furnishings, pillars and walls, can be seen as that which they are, but at the same time removed from their purely worldly function. Coloured by the *Sound Work*, by a sound which is normally perceived as pleasant, the sounds of the environment come to the fore and are no longer just heard without being aware of them – if they are not perceived as an irritating noise. Everyday noises are detached to a certain degree from the connotations normally associated with them, especially connotations of 'noise pollution'. The colouring of the environmental noises by the sound of Neuhaus's work has something of a purifying effect. Unlike the example of the stained glass windows, in the work of Max Neuhaus the way the correlation of sounds is perceived is left largely to the individual listener. This explains why Neuhaus describes the sound of his work in terms of 'catalysts for shifts in frame of mind'. **10**

Listening, perceiving in Neuhaus's work is an activity, a question of orientation, of differentiating, of exploring, of shifting, and not so much a question of mood or contemplation. *Times Square* demands a listener in motion. The sound itself has to be discovered in the first place, recognized as the sound of the work, and then it requires a constant adaptation of attention. This is where time comes into play. The work being static and site-related, the perception of its sound requires time-related activity and draws attention to the sequences of time that inform the site. Consequently, each listener perceives something different, both because of the real changes of all that occurs irrevocably in time and, as such, belongs to the work, and also on grounds of the individual disposition of each listener. The work changes and emerges through productive perception; it is not a positive given.

With each one of his *Sound Works* Max Neuhaus makes a case for the immediacy of aesthetic experience. His use of sound, then, does inform an operation in the expanded field of sculpture that is not bound to a visual or tangible object. This way he upholds the *Sound Work*'s claim to the primacy of an authentic experience of space – without, however, imposing it on whoever encounters such a work: at any time it is up to him or her to respond to it or not. The sense of presence, however, that is connected to the experience of a *Sound Work* is that of a fluctuating presence. It is this that requires a material as physical and as ungraspable as sound.

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Footnotes

1. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Vandalismus von oben. Richard Serras *Tilted Arc* in New York', in: Walter Grasskamp (ed.), *Unerwünschte Monumente* (Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 1989).
2. Douglas Crimp, 'Richard Serra's Urban Sculpture. An Interview by Douglas Crimp' (*Arts Magazine*, November 1980) in: Richard Serra, *Writings Interviews* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 127.
3. Ibid.
4. Max Neuhaus, *Place. Sound Works* Volume III (Ostfildern, 1994), 5.
5. Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October*8, 1979, 31 ff.
6. Ibid., 42 ff.
7. Max Neuhaus, *Place*, op. cit., 20.
8. 'Traditonally composers have placed the elements of a composition in time. One idea which I am interested in is locating them, instead, in space, and letting the listener place them in his own time.' Max Neuhaus, 'Program Notes', in: Max Neuhaus, *Inscription, Sound Works* Volume I (Ostfildern, 1994), 34.
9. Denys Zacharopoulos, 'Max Neuhaus', in: *Max Neuhaus*, (Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Locmine, France: Edition du Centre d'Art, 1987).
10. Max Neuhaus: 'Notes on Place and Moment', in: Max Neuhaus, *Inscription*, op. cit., 97.

Tags

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